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O'Brien's Night

By William Buckley Jr.



ARTHUR SCHLESINGER JR. was pulverized the other night, which is okay by a lot of people except that ostensibly he was put up there on the television program to defend the point of view that U.S. foreign policy, to the extent that it is anti-Communist, has a moral basis for being so. His adversary was Conor Cruise O'Brien, like Mr. Schlesinger a professor. Mr. O'Brien is an Irishman whose antipathy to the United States and to western ways has lately caused him to emerge as objectively pro-Communist.

An example: Mr. O'Brien said, on the television show sponsored by Metromedia, that developing nations tend to face three alternative forms of government. One, "bogus democracy." Two, "right wing despotism." Three, "Communism." As far as Mr. O'Brien is concerned, the man who chooses number three is just as moral as the man who chooses either of the other two.

Mr. Schlesinger, aide to President John F. Kennedy, author, writer, polemicist, wit, solon, dreadnaught, bumbled pietistical responses. The end result was to give the impression that his differences with Mr. O'Brien were not such as to warrant significant attention.

AN enormously interesting performance, especially if one reminds oneself that Mr. Schlesinger is a constant companion and mentor of Senator Robert Kennedy, who desires to become President of the United States.

One should be very explicit. Mr. Schlesinger managed in the course of the evening's rout to say 1) that in effect he agreed with everything O'Brien had to say about the Vietnam war. I.e., that it is cruel, heedless, indefensible. 2) That he agreed with O'Brien that J. Edgar Hoover was a dreadful influence on America, and that he should be fired. And 3) that he agreed with O'Brien that there are no differences worth drawing between the Communist states and such "allegedly Free World states" as Portugal, Spain and South Africa.

What were we all listening for? The subject was "The morality of Anti-Communism." Mr. Schlesinger began by making a few points

gently and genteelly, such as that he believed that communism is dogmatic, vain, cruel, and stupid. O'Brien said what the hell, so is Christianity dogmatic, so is Lyndon Johnson vain, so were the industrialists and slaveowners of the 19th Century cruel, so is American foreign policy stupid.

Schlesinger was so overcome by the arguments of his putative adversary, that the best he could do was to say that the non-Communist countries were not organically cruel, and that their systems carried within them the seeds of reform. To which O'Brien blithely answered that "free enterprise cruelty" (the Industrial Revolution) was not really any worse than the organized and capricious cruelty of Stalin; and that anyway the very fact that things were getting better all the time in the Soviet Union showed that the Communist states also generate the seeds of reform.

ON a specific point, Mr. O'Brien absolutely proved to the audience that Mr. Schlesinger was just plain lying when, as recently as a few months ago, he wrote a public letter giving the impression that the British magazine *Encounter* had not been subsidized by the CIA. A founding editor of *Encounter* (Stephen Spender) turned out to be a member of the audience, and he more or less admitted that he too had come to know that it was a CIA affair. Dwight Macdonald, who worked for *Encounter*, admitted that he had been beguiled. And Schlesinger was left mumbling vague irrelevancies about how there was a difference between *Encounter* and the Congress for Cultural Freedom (there is no relevant difference: the latter subsidized the former); that he admitted he knew all about it when he joined the government (that was way back in 1961 for five years before he wrote his disingenuous letter); and anyway, aren't we in favor of free trade unions and the intellectuals?

It was O'Brien's night, all right. And one wonders what on earth got into Metromedia to sponsor an evening's "debate" between a pro-Communist (that is what, in context of the discussion, Mr. O'Brien most indisputably was), and a gentleman whose only enthusiasms of the evening were a denunciation of J. Edgar Hoover and of the Vietnam war.